

94 Luther's Outburst Against the
Peasants.

Luther erred in mistaking Miinzer as the mouthpiece of the German peasants. He forgot that these men had practical grievances to redress, and were taking the most practical way of forcing this redress in the rough fashion of the times. He was decidedly in error, too, in ascribing wholesale a sanguinary character to the movement. To judge from his savage tone, the peasants were a set of wanton murderers, while the fact is that murder was the exception, not the rule. He can on no account condone rebellion against constituted authority. A rebel may be put to death by any one without further ado, as one would hasten to put out a fire by any means possible. Verily, the barbarous language of the theologian outdoes that of the Muhlhausen prophet in its ferocity. "Therefore strike, throttle, stab, secretly or openly, whoever can, and remember that there is nothing more poisonous, more hurtful, more devilish than a rebellious man." "These are fine Christians. I believe that there is no longer a single devil in hell; they have all taken possession of the peasants/" "Strike down the devils" is, therefore, the keynote of this wild shriek of vengeance "Against the murderous and thievish bands of the Boers," as he called his maniac effusion. His belief in the devil, and his slavish doctrine of passive obedience, made him a raving savage. It is indeed a strange aberration of mind that now finds in princes and lords the servants of God to kill, hang, and burn as God's deputies. Formerly we were occasionally reminded that they too, in opposing Luther more especially, were the agents of the devil. Now they are saints. Nay, "whoever is slain in the cause of constituted authority is a true martyr in the sight of God,"¹ whereas, "whoever is killed on the Boers' side will burn for ever in hell" (*em ewiger Hollebrand ist*). Now is the time to make martyrs.
^{<4} Therefore, dear lords," runs the grim conclusion, "stab, strike, throttle who can/" This savage conclusion is its own judgment, and the judgment is to brand Luther with indelible disgrace, both as a theologian and a Christian, as far as this episode of his history is concerned. No wonder that he felt compelled to write a defence and an explanation in the form of a "sendbrief" to the Chancellor of Mansfeld, Caspar Miiller. Neither defence nor explanation is satisfactory. Though the son of a poor man, Luther had no